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**JUST A PROGRESSIVE STEP: WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT IN TURKISH  
MICROCREDIT PRACTICES**

***LOS PROGRAMAS DE MICROCRÉDITO EN TURQUÍA: UN PASO HACIA EL  
EMPODERAMIENTO DE LAS MUJERES***

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## Abstract

In developing countries, the economic potential of women has long been under-utilized as a means of lifting households and communities out of poverty. In this respect, microcredit schemes offer an innovative form of social welfare, widely accessible to women. This study examines one such program from the Turkish context: the *Maya Enterprise for Micro Finance*, a conditional credit opportunity for women to start and/or develop their own businesses, granted by the Foundation for the Support of Women's Work (KEDV). Our study aimed to explore the impact of KEDV's credit transfer scheme on the lives of users, especially in terms of the psychological and economic empowerment of women. Deploying a mixed methods research strategy, we administered and analyzed quantitative surveys (n=336) in order to determine the perceptions, thoughts, insights and reactions of KEDV program users, also conducting qualitative interviews with 21 participants. Our findings indicate that the program was influential in empowering women by increasing their self-confidence and changing their relationship with other people in the household.

## Resumen

En los países en desarrollo, el potencial económico de las mujeres ha sido subutilizado durante mucho tiempo como un medio para sacar a los hogares y las comunidades de la pobreza. A este respecto, los planes de microcrédito ofrecen una forma innovadora de bienestar social, que es ampliamente accesible para las mujeres. Este estudio examina uno de esos programas desde el contexto turco: *Maya Enterprise for Micro Finance*, una oportunidad de crédito condicional para que las mujeres comiencen y/o desarrollen sus propios negocios, otorgada por la Fundación para el Apoyo al Trabajo de las Mujeres (KEDV). El objetivo de nuestro estudio fue explorar el impacto del esquema de transferencia de crédito de KEDV en la vida de las usuarias, especialmente en términos del empoderamiento psicológico y económico de las mujeres. Para ello, se siguió una estrategia de investigación de métodos mixtos, aplicando y analizando encuestas cuantitativas (n=336) para determinar las percepciones, pensamientos, ideas y reacciones de las usuarias del programa KEDV, y también mediante entrevistas cualitativas con 21 participantes. Nuestros hallazgos indican que el programa influyó en el empoderamiento de las mujeres, al aumentar su autoconfianza y cambiar su relación con otras personas en el hogar.

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**KW** : Microcredit; empowerment; Turkey; women

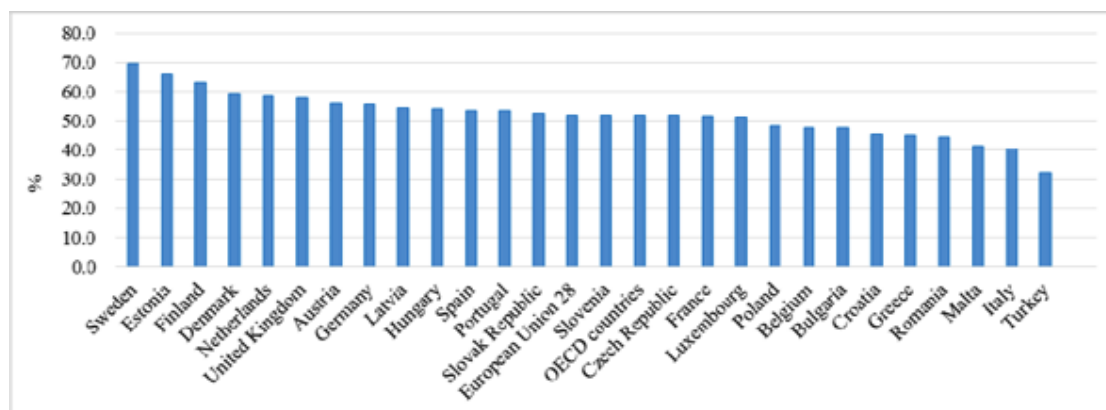
**PC** : Microcrédito; empoderamiento; Turquía; mujeres

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## Introduction

The dominance of neoliberal policies and globalization in the international arena in the 1980s led to fundamental alterations in the role of the state, widespread socio-economic inequity and high levels of poverty across many regions. In late Modernity, poverty arises not from resource scarcity as in the past, but from social deprivation, lack of power, and unfair distribution of resources (Koray, 2010; Balkır & Apaydın, 2011; Alptekin & Aksan, 2014). It has been claimed that “60-70% of the world's poor are women, and that the link between gender and poverty has grown more obvious over time” (United Nations Development Programme, 1995, 1996. Cited in Marcoux, 1997, p. 6).

Figure 1.- LFPR of Women in Selected Countries (2016) (%)



Source: Elaboration based on OECD (2017), Labour Force Statistics

In Turkey, the labour force participation rate of women is 31.5 per cent, a significantly lower rate than the world average of 49 per cent in 2016 (Buğra & Yılmaz, 2016), and as Figure 1 demonstrates, the country ranks lowest among OECD and EU-28 countries on this measure. Moreover, female poverty rates are higher than those of the general population. In 2016, 14.6% of Turkey's population was classified as at risk of poverty, with women accounting for two-thirds of this group (Turkish Statistical Institute, 2017). The link between gender and poverty rate is particularly obvious in single female-parent households, and the total female unemployment rate of Turkey between the ages of 15-64 was 13.7 per cent in 2016. Poverty rates are strongly indicative of inequalities which predominate in the fields of employment and education: women live as housewives without participating in working life, do not have their own income, are unable to benefit from educational opportunities and often function as unpaid family workers in agricultural or informal sectors in urban areas.

There is a clear link between financial aid and activities, which support the struggle against women's poverty and exclusion from economic life (Balci, 2010; Sapançali, 2005). While social welfare as a whole is of vital importance, approaches that extend beyond financial hand-outs to the poor produce more lasting solutions. Among these approaches, "aid programs such as microcredit programs support the formation of a continuous resource to combat poverty" (Topçuoğlu & Aksan, 2014, p.131). In this context, the potential of microcredit to alleviate poverty was recognised by the UN, which assigned 2015 as the "International Year of Microcredit". Besides raising awareness of microcredit as a means to combat poverty, the UN recognition boosted the number of partnership schemes launched across the financial sector through a range of incentives, helping to transform microcredit into a truly international phenomenon. Indeed, a little working capital credit can be sufficient to launch small business ventures in developing countries, enabling people to lift themselves and their families out of poverty.

This study was motivated by the wish to evaluate the efficacy of microcredit as a tool to aid women's struggle against poverty and its effects on their empowerment. The study first considers how the social right of women to access gainful employment is actualized in the context of Turkey. Next, the impact on women's empowerment in the struggle against poverty is determined by analyzing the social and economic behavior of low-income women at the micro level. In this context, women are more inclined to use income from microcredit for domestic purposes due to their maternal and feminine roles. The thematic focus considers the impact of microcredit in terms of the ways that resources were channeled to the household by women who accessed the KEDV program, the roles played by women in the decision-making process, and how microcredit affected the capacity of women to change their own lives. Observations and interviews held during the field research of this study revealed that the beneficiaries of microcredit also require other forms of support besides the financial in order to develop sustainable and satisfying income-generating businesses.

## **1. Conceptual framework**

### **1.1. Female poverty**

Women's poverty has been repeatedly confirmed by the UN as a serious global problem. In the Action Plan of the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995, the issue of women's poverty was emphasized through the concept of "feminization of poverty" (Şener,

2009, p.3). According to Chant's analysis (2003), factors responsible for the feminization of poverty are gender inequalities in terms of fundamental rights, gender-differentiated effects of neoliberal restructuring, informality and feminization of labour, migration-related erosion of networks based on kinship, and so on.

According to Ecevit (2003), gender-mediated inequalities of opportunity and power are among the most fundamental reasons for women's poverty, causing women and men to experience poverty in different forms, and more intensely in the case of women. Hence, it is more illuminating to examine the link between gender inequality and poverty rather than label the current situation as the "feminization of poverty" (Vicente, 2005, p.14). Gender discrimination leads to unequal distribution of resources and disadvantages women (Bridge, 2001). Gender-based inequities in terms of access to resources and income traps women into a spiral of poverty arising from unequal involvement in property, control of income, and the perceived invalidity of their labour (Kargı, 2011; Kümbetoğlu, 2002).

Sen (1999), on the other hand, asks that "poverty be understood as a state of deprivation of basic capacities rather than in terms of income loss and access to resources" (p. 126). Lack of access to services such as education and health, inability to participate in decision-making processes, being deprived of political freedoms, lack of self-expression, and insecurity characterise states of poverty (Gürses, 2009). Expressed more concretely, poverty constrains the individual's freedom to be and do in any sphere of life (Kardam & Yüksel, 2004; Semerci, 2007). Employment conditions, women's possession of property, educational opportunities, and women's participation in family decision-making processes are among the conditions that affect women's empowerment and existence as individuals (Atteraya, Gnawali & Palley, 2016).

## **1.2. Female Empowerment**

It is a fundamental human right for women to use their labour and productive capacities to increase their happiness, improve their quality of life, and create economic security (Atalayer, 2011). In democratic countries, within the scope of the right to work (which itself depends on the socio-economic rights of citizens), measures are taken to protect the right of everyone willing to work to do so in conditions which uphold human dignity (Dişbudak & Bozkulak, 2010). According to Koray (2010), "it is important that everyone can stand on their own, earn income, have various opportunities available to him/her, and become an accepted

member of the socioeconomic system" (p. 18). In this way, each individual may build and develop their own productive capacity and autonomy through, for example, the equitable provision of rights in education, sufficiency of income and social security (Engelen, 2002).

For Stromquist (1995), "empowerment is the process of changing the distribution of power among institutions and people in society" (p. 15). Empowerment consists of cognitive, psychological, economic and political components. Cognitive empowerment involves a process in which women understand the conditions and causes of submissiveness at the micro and macro social level. This is the process of creating a new understanding of gender relations and destroying the old beliefs of strong gender stereotypes. The psychological component defines the emotional state that women can develop to change the conditions they are in. The economic component requires that at the beginning, no matter how small or how difficult, the woman engages in a productive activity that will give her some degree of autonomy. The political component is defined as being organized and acting to change something (Stromquist, 1995).

According to Lazo (1995), "self-empowerment is a woman's ability to acquire autonomy, to make decisions about her own life, and to be fully involved in political economy and social decision-making processes" (p. 23). What is socially understood by empowerment is that "it is the process of gaining control of women's own lives by knowing and defending their rights in the household or at the local and international levels" (Medel & Boczynek, 1995, p.8). The empowerment of a woman occurs when she can make choices concerning her own life by accessing material, human and social resources (Arunkumar, Anand, Anand, Rengarajan & Shyam, 2016). While realizing these vital preferences, "it is possible to think beyond social norms and to challenge the status quo" (Brody et al., 2017, p.16).

By allowing women to make choices, to materialize these preferences as they desire and to obtain the results they want, the position of women in society can be strengthened. According to the UN, "among the basic parameters of empowerment are women's right to choose, their right to access resources, the right to control their own lives, and the ability to create social and economic order by gaining self-esteem" (Awojobi, 2014, p. 18). The empowerment of women can be realised by increasing their access to socioeconomic goods. Providing equality of access to income and educational opportunities, involving women in family decision-making processes, acknowledging women's right to acquire property and preventing early age marriages are all important means of achieving female empowerment (Atteraya et al., 2016).

### 1.3. Evaluations of microcredit in the literature

Initiatives designed to empower women have tended to focus on improving their economic and employment status. Empowering women and the poor, and eliminating poverty, are among the basic goals of microcredit (Arunkumar et al., 2016). Since 1991, the NOW-Global Fund for Women has used microcredit to support women's entrepreneurship and to prevent discrimination in the labour market. The fund aims to eliminate gender-based income inequality by allowing women to contribute to employment (Fidan & Yeşil, 2014). From a financial view, "women are regarded as safer investments, more likely to spend their money on the welfare of their family and more reliable than men in the sense of paying their debts" (Krenz, Gibert & Mandayam, 2014, p.312). Paid weekly, microcredit offers an easily-accessible means of incentivising women to take part in income-generating activities, and because the loans do not require collateral or surety, they can be accessed by poor people who have previously been unable to obtain credit through the banking system. Female users of microcredit in the city of Kocaeli, Turkey "saw an increase of 64.7% and 28.4% in the development of existing businesses and establishment of new businesses respectively" (Bayraktutan & Akatay, 2012, p.24).

The potential for women to improve themselves through "social, psychological and economic empowerment is one of the strongest arguments underpinning broadly positive evaluations of microcredit in the literature" (Ören, Negiz & Akman, 2012, p. 326). By increasing the capacity of women to reach their entrepreneurial potential and to profit independently from their economic activities, women's self-confidence, self-reliance and openness to self-development are also increased (Taşpınar, 2013; see also Özmen, 2012; Sample, 2011; Robinson, 2001; Hulme & Mosley, 1997). Littlefield's research indicates that microcredit programs aimed at ensuring access to credit for poor women will increase the collective consciousness and collective action capacities of women organizing in groups within the relational framework of loan and indebtedness, ultimately strengthening them socio-economically and politically within society (Littlefield, Morduch & Hashemi, 2003).

Participants not only gain greater access to material resources, but also increased levels of self-confidence, mobility, negotiation skills, and increased levels of initiating and participating in family decisions, as well as participation in wider social networks (Atteraya et al., 2016; Krenz et al., 2014; Karim, 2008). Microcredit also empowers women from the psychosociological perspective by encouraging self-sufficiency rather than financial dependency. The 'helpless housewife' identity is replaced by one of greater value and authority in the

eyes of family members, and increased self-confidence occurs via exposure to business practices (Osmani, 2007, p.696).

As members of microcredit collectives, participants bring added economic dynamism and security to households (Osmani, 2007). Their awareness of and active participation in political and legal issues increases, they start using basic health services more, and they become more willing to send their children to school (Atteraya et al., 2016; Awojobi, 2014). Importantly, microcredit not only increases the living standards of women but also raises the standards of other individuals within the family, expanding educational opportunities for children and increasing access to health services. Women who have previously been dependent on spousal income to take their children to school, to shop or to visit a doctor can now meet these expenses using their own money and according to their own initiative (Awojobi, 2014).

Despite these positive aspects, microcredit has also been subject to sustained criticism. Chowdhury (2009, p.2) argues that "microcredit has developed some innovative management and business strategies, while the effect on poverty reduction is doubtful", but also emphasizes the significance of microcredit in establishing a social safety net and regulating consumption. Research carried out by Balkız & Öztürk (2013) in Diyarbakır, Turkey, also shows that the low incomes earned through microcredit do not typically guarantee women's economic empowerment. Mixed methods research, also conducted in Diyarbakır, similarly indicates that microcredit, while improving existing practices and situations for women, nevertheless failed to expand their economic opportunities (Adaman & Bulut, 2007).

Another critique of microcredit is the fact that "women who use the loans to establish domestic businesses frequently remain tied to the informal employment sector" (Burritt, 2003, p. 22). Furthermore, because many microcredit loans are unsecured, the likelihood of non-repayment and consequent waste of the capital invested increases. There is also doubt as to whether microcredit is always accessed by the poorest individuals (Yayla, 2012). Microcredit may not always be used by its official recipients: "although women repay the loans, sometimes male relatives (including husbands and sons) control or use the money for their own needs" (Bordat, Davis & Kouzzi, 2011, p.91). In this case, repayment becomes difficult and microcredit cannot achieve its intended purpose (Adaman & Bulut, 2007).



Moreover, microcredit may be an insufficient solution to more widespread socioeconomic issues. After a certain point, the success of microcredit is dependent on market conditions, which require large-scale investments to allow small businesses to prosper. In the absence of this investment, income-generating activity is often limited (Kabakçı, 2012). Furthermore, contrary to neoliberal theory, simply giving microcredit to women is not enough to transform their situations, since the economic system and patriarchal mentality that shapes issues around health, household, violence and the reproductive problems of both men and women must also be changed (Drolet, 2010). When such other conditions are unchanged, women are more inclined to use income from microcredit for domestic purposes due to their maternal and feminine roles rather than solving these underlying issues (Topçuoğlu & Aksan, 2014).

As the foregoing discussion indicates, multiple studies attest to the obvious benefits of microcredit in terms of its impacts on personal and domestic aspects of women's lives. Nevertheless, microcredit has been subject to forceful critique for failing to replace the informal economic sector with more permanent and stable solutions to economic deprivation. Its critics also take issue with the assumption that women's equality and empowerment can be attained solely via equal access to financial credit. Because the relationship between microcredit and women's empowerment is represented in such complex and contradictory ways, more empirical information on the phenomenon is required, and this is the major aim of the current study.

Most fundamentally, our research aimed to explore how female users of microcredit experience the programs. In specific terms, our focal area of interest was whether and how microcredit changed the lives of credit recipients in the areas of personal life, family life, and professional life. The study also aimed to establish the existence and nature of changes in decision-making processes in domestic and business life after participating in microcredit programs.

## **2. Methodology**

### **2.1. Research Design**

This study adopted a mixed methods design, which follows Creswell's (2009) sequential explanatory strategy approach. We first examined our data quantitatively before focusing on qualitative methods in order to explore individual participants' views, triangulate the

quantitative findings and report the details. Therefore, we followed two different procedures for sampling, data collection and analysis of the research phenomenon.

## **2.2. Sample and Data Collection**

In the first phase, the quantitative data for the study was obtained through interviews with 336 female microcredit users from Turkey. We interviewed female members of the Eskişehir and Kocaeli provincial branches of KEDV between 2015 and 2016. This data was generated through face-to-face, semi-structured interviews with participants. Each interview took an average of 25 minutes.

Next, qualitative interview data was obtained using CATI (computer assisted telephone interview). Following Sekaran & Bougie (2003), we used a voice recording system to record responses; the interviews were then transcribed. The sample comprised 21 participants from the Eskişehir branch of KEDV. The interviews took an average of 15 minutes and were conducted during 2016.

## **2.3. Measures**

Since we used a mixed method strategy, two different surveys were used for the quantitative and qualitative data collection. The first survey consisted of a questionnaire containing open-ended and closed items, from which derived demographic data, as well as information about the conditions of microcredit use, the changes microcredit creates in women's lives, and the effect of microcredit on employment. The survey questions drew on instruments used in several previous studies. Items exploring how users were informed about micro credit, their reasons for applying, and how their lives changed after working were adapted from Bayraktutan's paper (2012). Items focusing on change in women's social and economic position measures were derived from Ören et al. (2012).

Participants were asked to rate the influence of micro-credit on household decision-making in the areas of family planning and work, as well as spending and regulation of revenues. We used two different scales to determine the extent of women's empowerment as a result of microcredit. These scales are termed *Women's Empowerment I* and *II*. In the first scale, responses to questions about the effect of microfinance on economic wellbeing and the empowerment of women through increasing self confidence were adopted from Awojobi's

(2014) work, based on a 5-point Likert scale (*1=totally disagree to 5= totally agree*); results are presented in Tables 3-4. The second scale, which contains items pertaining to women's empowerment after using micro credit, was informed by Baltacı (2011) and also deploys a 5-point Likert scale (*1=totally disagree to 5= totally agree*) (see Table 3-4).

The qualitative interviews included 20 open-ended questions; these aimed to understand the participants' potential as entrepreneurs, and how their business ambitions aligned with self-improvement and empowerment in social, psychological or economic terms as a result of participating in the microcredit scheme.

## **2.4. Analysis**

We used SPSS software to analyze the quantitative data, applying descriptive statistics to the measures mentioned above. In addition, we ensured the reliability of the two empowerment scales by Cronbach's Alpha (empowerment I  $\alpha=.74$ ; empowerment II  $\alpha=.80$ ). We interpreted the data by recording percentages and mean values for the variables. Following this, we analyzed the qualitative data in order to make generalizations parallel to the quantitative findings, thereby also strengthening the reliability and validity of our results. The main findings were supported with individual quotations to provide insights into how the participants had changed after using microcredit.

## **3. Findings and discussions**

As Table 1 demonstrates, 0,9% of the 336 women participating in the survey were 18-25 years old, 18% 26-35 years, 31,4% 36-44 years, 31% 45-56 years, with 15% of the sample aged 55 and over. This suggests that the uptake of microcredit is strongest among middle-aged women, rather than the younger or senior age groups.

In terms of educational status, 0,9% of 336 women were illiterate. 38,4%, 11,3% and 34,5% of participants graduated from primary, middle and high school respectively, with 14,9% identifying as university graduates. This indicates that microcredit is accessed most by female primary school graduates whose level of education is a barrier to employment, and by high school or university graduates wishing to establish and position themselves within the job market.

From the point of marital status, 13,4% of 336 women were single, 68,8% were married, 9,8% were separated and 8% were widowed. These results suggest that microcredit facilitates married women's employment in particular. According to Osmani (2007) "microcredit gives chances to married women to have a more valuable role in the family rather than domestic roles such as housework or raising kids" (p. 696). Thus, it is possible to say that microcredit is influential to change the position of woman in the family.

In terms of offspring, 31,5% of participants had no children; 26,5% had one child; 32,4% two children; 8% three children and 1,5% had four children. Women with no children have the opportunity to participate more fully and for longer durations in business life, but our results indicate that such opportunities become progressively fewer as the number of children increases.

While the uptake of microcredit was much greater in Eskişehir than Kocaeli (73,2% versus 26,8% of participants respectively were participating in the KEDV program), 96% of the women we surveyed had heard of the opportunity through their social circles. The role of face-to-face communication in promoting microcredit is thus apparent. This result confirms previous research which found that 92% of users in Kocaeli had been informed about microcredit by neighbours and friends (Bayraktutan & Akatay, 2012).

We also determined that 83,6% of participants had a business background, indicating that microcredit users seem particularly focused on developing existing or previous work experiences rather than starting from scratch. Rather than supporting new ventures, the amount of microcredit provided indicates its importance as an additional contribution to existing businesses. This interpretation was supported by interviews, where microcredit was framed as supplementary to existing capital, and/or a means of obtaining goods or services to aid business development. For example, A.T stated that she already owned her business and only used microcredit capital in order to purchase equipment. Other participants developed their fields of operation or customer portfolios with the support of microcredit. For instance, F.B. commented that the credit had expanded her network of customers, ultimately increasing her income. Likewise, H.Y reported how she had expanded her network of customers by interacting with other members of the microcredit group, a point also made by other participants, such as M.B.

The results pertaining to the use of microcredit clearly indicate divergence from its original ideal of reaching the poorest poor. It seems that "the loan works better for the development of businesses, rather than start-ups" (Belwal, Tamiru & Singh, 2012, p.96). Our finding that

microcredit is primarily used to develop current businesses also aligns with that of Bayraktutan & Akatay (2012). However, the same conclusion seems to be contradicted by Tapşın's analysis (2016), which revealed that microcredit was primarily used by unemployed women. On the other hand, it is clear that the intra-group support, which arises from microcredit, is a crucial factor in developing existing businesses. Furthermore, as Awojobi claims, evidence that microcredit is being used for existing business development as opposed to start-ups indicates its success in enabling women's participation in business, and subsequently, their potential for greater empowerment (Awojobi, 2014). In this sense, it is also possible to claim that microcredit is being used in accordance with its stated purposes.

The majority (54,8%) of sales and production was carried out in domestic settings, with 29,3% of these activities taking place on the user's commercial premises. These results indicate the continued importance of women's domestic roles, with business activity fitted in around other domestic work and income seen as a contribution to the household budget. This problematizes microcredit as a means of transforming women into independent economic entities. It seems that "women continue to work without job security and only for small incomes" (Balkız & Öztürk, 2013, p.9). Instead of creating women's jobs in the public sphere and freeing them from the domestic sphere, microcredit allows women to participate in economic life predominantly via domestic production; in other words, "it does not bring a disturbance to the existing domestic system in the short term" (Balkız & Öztürk, 2013, p.9). Participants appeared more inclined to use microcredit to perform additional work within an existing domestic order. At the same time, the loans may also simply be insufficient to establish medium or large-scale enterprises.

Finally, participants were employed in similar proportions in the trade (48,8%) and production sectors (42,8%), with 8,4% of participants employed in the service sector. 70% of monthly earnings were below 1000 TL (earnings were below 285,7 USD in 2016), which is 33% less than today's minimum wage. To put this figure into context, 1300,99 TL (371,7 USD in 2016) was the implemented net minimum wage through the year of 2016 in Turkey. Whereas 59,3% of respondents were dependent on the incomes of other family members, only 28.1% reported their earnings were sufficient to live independently. These figures indicate that female users of microcredit do not earn enough to maintain their own social security independent of their families.

Table 1. Basic demographic and general information of women who received microcredit

Number of women participating: 336

| Education level  | %           | Age range   | %           | Marital Status | %           | Number of children | %           |
|------------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|----------------|-------------|--------------------|-------------|
| Not literate     | 0,90        | 18-25       | 5           | Single         | 13,40       | 0                  | 31,50       |
| Primary school   | 38,40       | 26-35       | 18          | Married        | 68,80       | 1                  | 26,50       |
| Secondary school | 11,30       | 36-45       | 31          | Separate       | 9,80        | 2                  | 32,40       |
| High school      | 34,50       | 45-56       | 31          | Widow          | 8,00        | 3                  | 8,00        |
| University       | 14,90       | 56 and over | 15          |                |             | 4                  | 1,50        |
| <b>Total</b>     | <b>100%</b> |             | <b>100%</b> |                | <b>100%</b> |                    | <b>100%</b> |

| Credit Department | %           | Awareness          | %           | Work History | %           | Salesroom           | %           |
|-------------------|-------------|--------------------|-------------|--------------|-------------|---------------------|-------------|
| Kocaeli           | 26,80       | Social Environment | 94,60       | Yes          | 83,60       | Home                | 54,80       |
| Eskişehir         | 73,20       | Press              | 4,80        | No           | 16,40       | Street Bench        | 11,50       |
|                   |             | Internet           | 0,60        |              |             | Neighborhood Market | 4,30        |
|                   |             |                    |             |              |             | Shop                | 29,30       |
| <b>Total</b>      | <b>100%</b> |                    | <b>100%</b> |              | <b>100%</b> |                     | <b>100%</b> |

| Sector       | %           | Monthly Income                         | %           | SSI             | %           | Credit Usage Areas  | %           |
|--------------|-------------|--|-------------|-----------------|-------------|---------------------|-------------|
| Trade        | 48,8        | 0-1000 TL<br>(0-285,7 USD)             | 70,00       | My own business | 28,1        | Business Investment | 99,70%      |
| Production   | 42,8        | 1000-2000TL<br>(285-571 USD)           | 16,10       | Parents         | 59,3        | Saving              | 0,30%       |
| Service      | 8,4         | 2000-3000 TL<br>(571- 857 USD)         | 7,20        | Uninsured       | 3,3         |                     |             |
|              |             | 3000 TL and over<br>(857 USD and over) | 6,80        | Other           | 6,3         |                     |             |
| <b>Total</b> | <b>100%</b> |  | <b>100%</b> |                 | <b>100%</b> |                     | <b>100%</b> |

Source: Survey data

### 3.1. Decision Making Process

As indicated in Section 2.2, microcredit has been found to increase the participation of women in decision-making processes and thereby leads to greater autonomy in the economic and personal spheres of life. Accordingly, Table 2 summarises the experiences of women dependent on microcredit across a range of related measures.

Whereas a high percentage of women took the initiative to use microcredit (69,6%), and spend their business's revenues (74,4%) themselves, decisions about family planning (24,7%) and relocation (26,8%) were usually made in consultation with other family members (see Table 2). The qualitative data confirmed this range of decision-making processes. For example, M.B reported that after using microcredit, her partner's trust in her ability to take household spending decisions increased, and he allowed her control over the household budget. This case points to the contribution of microcredit both to women's decision-making in financial matters and the positive effect of increasing the status of women within the family (Ören et al., 2012). Participants who used microcredit to develop their businesses were found to be engaged in "luxury" spending, such as Y.G, who bought a car along with initiating additional domestic expenditures. In general, we found that microcredit enabled women to take spending decisions, to buy the basic goods or services required for the development of income or work, and use this money to meet the costs of child education or to contribute to their homes.

Table 2. Decision Making Process

|                              | Single | Spouse | Extended Family | %    | Number |
|------------------------------|--------|--------|-----------------|------|--------|
| Procreating                  | 24,70% | 2,10%  | 73,20%          | 100% | 336    |
| Working                      | 69,60% | 1,50%  | 28,90%          | 100% | 336    |
| Spending Revenue             | 74,40% | 1,20%  | 24,40%          | 100% | 336    |
| Controlling financial status | 69,90% | 3,00%  | 27,10%          | 100% | 336    |
| Relocation                   | 26,80% | 5,70%  | 67,60%          | 100% | 336    |

Source: Survey data

The impact of microcredit on family planning and relocation issues was much less apparent. These indicators are important in terms of determining whether more fundamental changes in the position of women in the family has taken place, whether traditions are maintained, and whether the household has been democratically reoriented (Chowdhury, 2009). Reproductive control is an especially important aspect of women's control over their own bodies. The questions of whether and to what extent microcredit mediated women's reproductive decision-making cannot be answered definitively: "women do not control this decision on the issues of decision to move one place to another and family size (having children or not), which is a component of social empowerment" (Brody et al., 2017, p.19). Nevertheless, the survey results indicate that relocation decisions are no longer predominantly made by male spouses, but are shared by genders more equally.

Descriptive statistics on the changes in the lives of women using microcredit and their self-evaluations can be seen in numbers in Table 3 and Table 4. As seen in Table 3, the decision-making process of women using microcredit tends to be independent ( $\mu = 3,53$ ). Therefore, there is a clear link between economic independence thanks to microcredit and the kind of autonomous decision-making indicative of psychological empowerment (Ören et al., 2012). Indeed, autonomy in decision-making, "the freedom to participate in decision-making processes, and the ability to access domestic and external resources are the most prominent elements leading to female empowerment" (Chowdhury, 2009 p.87).

### **3.2. Empowerment**

The results indicate an effect of credit use and entrepreneurship on empowerment ( $\mu = 3,47$ ), a result convergent with previous studies (Bayraktutan & Akatay, 2012). The participants gained empowerment as they participated in economic activities in the public domain as members of a community. The tendency of female users of microcredit to value themselves more highly ( $\mu = 3.36$ ) can also be evaluated in parallel with this. It appears that increased visibility in the public domain and the ability to voice and share ideas with others, which accompany the role of breadwinner, increased the legitimacy of many women's words and ideas. Thus, women assume more powerful subject positions as they produce, become more socially active, and attain a strong position within the family (Ören et al., 2012; Peprah, 2012).



Interviews confirm that the participants had more confidence in and were more focussed on themselves after participating in the microcredit programme, experiencing significant and positive change as a result ( $\mu = 2.76$ ). Furthermore, their resulting empowerment did not negatively affect their family life ( $M = 1.24$ ), a finding in opposition to the widespread belief that a relative strengthening of female roles leads to male discomfort and strained relationships between the genders. Depending on one's interpretation, this finding may indicate the deep-rootedness of power imbalances in gender relations, or in contrast, that male partners viewed the microcredit-induced changes in their partners in positive terms.

Table 3. Descriptive of Empowerment I

|   | <b>N</b> | <b>Min.</b> | <b>Max.</b> | <b>Mean</b> | <b>St. Dev</b> |
|---|----------|-------------|-------------|-------------|----------------|
| I started to make my own decisions            | 336      | 1           | 5           | 3,5387      | 1,02141        |
| My self-reliance increased                    | 336      | 1           | 5           | 3,4792      | 1,08704        |
| People around me started to listen to me more | 336      | 1           | 5           | 3,369       | 1,08482        |
| No change in my relationship                  | 336      | 1           | 5           | 2,7619      | 1,05795        |
| My relationship with my family broken down    | 336      | 1           | 5           | 1,247       | 0,66579        |

Source: Interview data

Table 4, summarises how participants interpreted the positive effects of microcredit on their lives and relationships. Clearly, self-evaluation is closely connected to the social, cultural and economic context as well as intra-psychological awareness of one's potential. That said, the participants' situational and self-evaluations appear very positive overall ( $\mu = 4,15$ ). The belief shared by many participants that they could achieve as well as others was consistently high ( $\mu = 4,29$ ), as was their sense of self-reliance as businesspeople and entrepreneurs ( $\mu = 4,34$ ). Survey results also suggest that women who use microcredit believe they make a significant contribution to their family ( $\mu = 4,27$ ), and that families also find this contribution to be significant ( $\mu = 4,20$ ). These are likely to be highly motivating aspects of women's experience with microcredit. One participant who was interviewed stated that the use of microcredit increased confidence in her as a woman in the family. Participant Y.G remarked

that after the use of microcredit, her parents' confidence in her increased. She had assumed decision-making responsibilities for the domestic economy, and her case indicates how the presence of women's economic activities affects their status within the family. Overall, the fact that women develop pride in their own work, self-reliance and self-esteem through their contribution to the domestic budget parallels findings that report increased self-confidence and household development occurring as a result of access to microcredit (Baltacı, 2011).

Table 4.- Descriptive Data for Empowerment II

|   | N   | Min | Max | Mean   | St. Dev. |
|---|-----|-----|-----|--------|----------|
| I am generally happy with myself                              | 336 | 1   | 5   | 4,1577 | 0,50265  |
| I can do anything as good as others at least                  | 336 | 1   | 5   | 4,2917 | 0,55021  |
| I have the capacity to manage business                        | 336 | 1   | 5   | 4,3482 | 0,58401  |
| I think that the contribution I make to my family is valuable | 336 | 1   | 5   | 4,2798 | 0,57744  |
| My family finds my contributions valuable.                    | 336 | 1   | 5   | 4,2024 | 0,65617  |

Source: Survey data

## Conclusion

The literature on microcredit strongly indicates its considerable potential to improve women's lives, particularly in economic terms. Using loans for business and income, however, by no means guarantees the full empowerment of women. All the elements of psychological, social, political and economic empowerment must coexist and be experienced at both micro and macro levels for this process to be fully realised. The main conclusions revealed by this analysis of the effectiveness of microcredit in lifting women from poverty and empowering them more generally are as follows:

### The effect of microcredit on interpersonal relationships

This study shows that local and face-to-face relationships are of critical importance to the uptake and success of microcredit, and that interpersonal relations develop as a result of

participating in microcredit schemes. Women hear about microcredit most often from their immediate surroundings and make decisions based on their immediate access to models or taking into account of what they hear. Microcredit also provides an environment of solidarity and socialization for women. Within the same group, women continue to support each other while they continue their activities, develop group awareness and engage in shared activities.

### **The entrepreneurial effects of microcredit**

This research also indicated that women continue to work at their best, and at the same time, it shows that women are distanced from new fields. Because institutions that provide microcredit do not offer educational opportunities for women to develop skills that are key to commercial success, such as marketing, product development, management and entrepreneurship. Many women lack this knowledge, and it may therefore be the case that microcredit, while meeting its basic objective, is being used with less-than-maximal efficiency. This lack of guidance in using microcredit obliges women to rely on common sense views of business derived from their own knowledge and experience, which may limit the beneficial effects of such programs. Thus, microcredit needs to train women in new jobs and line of businesses.

A second issue is that women's domestic responsibilities constitute a significant limiting factor on the work that can be carried out through microcredit. Although microcredit contributes to income, it does not in and of itself increase the visibility of women in the public domain, nor guarantee their independent social security rights. For this reason, it is possible to say that microcredit functions to supplement the flow of basic capital to small enterprises which are themselves seen as a profitable side-line rather than the main source of household income.

Finally, the fact that most female users of microcredit were already working when they received microcredit indicates that it was primarily used as additional capital to expand existing businesses rather than to launch new enterprises. This interpretation is supported by finding that microcredit was used to purchase more goods or products as a working capital as opposed to revenue expenditure. Income from employment supported by microcredit is largely spent on work-related expenses, and secondly on household

expenditure, meaning that the credit is used by the users in a manner consistent with the expectations of the lending institution.

### **The effects of microcredit on women's empowerment**

While our study indicated certain reservations concerning the entrepreneurial effects of microcredit, women's gains in income are accompanied by female empowerment. First, there is an increase in self-confidence that women experience as part of their involvement in decision-making. Microcredit enables women to claim ownership of significant economic decisions as they apply for loans, manage their financial affairs and spend their income. On the other hand, while decisions about reproduction and location are not solely those of women, the fact that such decisions are made together within the family can be regarded as a step towards more democratic household relations. Assuming the role of breadwinner via microcredit confers numerous intra-psychological and inter-relational benefits. In addition, women's pride in their work and belief in self-improvement demonstrates its positive impact on the psychology of users.

### **Suggestions for further studies**

This study approached microcredit from the perspective of women's empowerment, and as such, it addresses only a fraction of its potential effects. In subsequent studies, as a comparative analysis, the study could be carried out with users of Turkey's Grameen Microfinance Program (TGMP), which provides loans to women in other regions of the country. Furthermore, the political power of women who use microcredit might also be investigated alongside other dimensions of socio-psychological empowerment. For instance, the impact of microcredit in shaping women's household roles and exposure to violence within the family could be examined. A comparative study of the attitudes of microcredit institutions and borrowers would also be of interest.

Overall, we believe that the research on women's empowerment and self-confidence presented in this article may be of benefit to such further studies, while noting that the cross-sectional methodology employed brings its limitations. Therefore, the influence of microcredit programs on women's empowerment, levels of poverty and political awareness could be studied by adopting a longitudinal approach in order to provide a perspective on the changes that occur as a result of microcredit.

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